DOCUMENT RESUME

AL 001 374

ED 021 240

By- Bailey, Charles- James N.

IS THERE A "MIDLAND" DIALECT OF AMERICAN ENGLISH?

Pub Date Jul 68

Note- 8p.; Slightly augmented version of paper read at Linguistic Society of America Summer Meeting, July 1968.

EDRS Price MF- $0.25 HC- $0.40

Descriptors- *AMERICAN ENGLISH, *DIALECT STUDIES, DISTINCTIVE FEATURES, GENERATIVE GRAMMAR, GRAMMAR, PHONOLOGY, *REGIONAL DIALECTS, VOCABULARY

The author reviews the lexical, grammatical, and phonological criteria claimed in support of the hypothesis that there is a "Midland" dialect. He finds the claim to be "an unsubstantiable artifact of word geography" and discusses the inadequacies of this method. While he is "not questioning the existence of a subdialect corresponding to what has been called the 'South Midland' dialect," he does claim that evidence can be provided to show that it should be renamed "Outer Southern" (since it will include western Southern speech); the dialect now called "Southern" would then be renamed "Inner Southern." By the same token, the so-called "North Midland" would be renamed "Lower Northern," and the currently named "Northern" would be renamed "Upper Northern." Explicit is the claim that the two Northern dialects and the two Southern dialects have more linguistically significant resemblances to each other than the resemblances that obtain etween the currently styled North and South Midland dialects (here renamed "Lower Northern" and "Outer Southern," respectively). It is suggested that the use of ordered rules in the sense of generative phonology will produce greater insights in the study of regional dialects. (AMM)

IS THERE A "MIDLAND" DIALECT OF AMERICAN ENGLISH?

Charles-James N. Bailey

ABSTRACT

The lexical, grammatical, and phonological criteria claimed in support of the hypothesis that there is a Midland dialect are reviewed, with the result that the claim is found to be an unsubstantiatable artifact of word geography, the inadequacies of which method are discussed. The so-called South Midland dialect is renamed "Outer Southern"; the so-called Southern dialect, "Inner Southern." Comments on the weighting of isoglosses follow. It is suggested that the use of ordered rules in the sense of generative phonology will produce greater insights. Final comments are made on the place of polydialectal hearer grammars in linguistic theory and in overcoming the synchronic-diachronic dichotomy.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS [redacted] MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Charles-James N. Bailey TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE [redacted] OWNER."

ED021240
AL 001 374

IS THERE A "MIDLAND" DIALECT OF AMERICAN ENGLISH?

Charles-James N. Bailey (University of Chicago)

(Slightly augmented version of paper read at L.S.A. Summer Meeting, July, 1968)

It has become a well-established, if not well-grounded, doctrine that outside of the Eastern States one is to distinguish three macrodialects called "Northern," "Midland," and "Southern," and that the "Midland" dialect is subdivided into "North Midland" and "South Midland." Concerning the latter, let me quote from Kurath and McDavid's The Pronunciation of English in the Atlantic States:

> Although the dialect of the South Midland has hardly a single feature that does not occur either in the North Midland or the South, we must recognize it as a distinct regional type because of its unique configuration of phonemic, phonic, and incidental features. [Kurath and McDavid 1961:19]
>
> None of the features in this complex are unique in themselves; all of them occur in the North Midland or the South. But the configuration of features is peculiar to the South Midland. [Kurath and McDavid 1961:18]

To subscribe to this, as I do, does not entail the further view that the idiom in question is a subdivision of the "Midland" dialect, rather than of the "Southern" one. The naive, intuitive view of most Americans is that what has been labled in the foregoing as the "South Midland" dialect is just a form of Southern speech, while all that lies to the north of it is one or another variety of "Northern" speech. The other, official view is implicit in the very nomenclature "South Midland" and is explicit is terms like "Major Dialect Boundaries" and "Minor Dialect Boundaries" found on the dialect maps supplied us by dialectologists (Malmstrom and Ashley 1963:43) of this way of thinking. It is difficult to pin down any linguistic[1] reasons in the various authorities for considering the southern rather than the northern boundary of what they call the "South Midland" dialect to be the the more important one.

Note the claim that is made by the official view. If the relative importance of the northern and southern boundaries of the "South Midland" dialect is what the official teaching stipulates, then the speech of a given class of speaker in the "South Midland" region--say, one from Chattanooga, Tennessee--bears more linguistically significant resemblances to the speech of comparable "North Midland" speakers than to the speech of other Tennesseeans who live in the "Southern" dialect area.[2] As one who grew up and attended his first twelve years of school in the so-called "South Midland" area, I regard this claim as unsubstantiatable, and not simply on the general grounds that no one has yet provided us with a way to prove that one dialect boundary is more important than another which has been demonstrated to be valid. For I am sure that even the wholly dubious procedure of simply totaling up the lexical, phonological, morphological, and syntactic differences, with equal weight accorded to each, will confirm that the boundary separating the alleged "North Midland" and "South Midland" dialects is of far greater importance than the one separating the latter from "Southern" speech. It will be the purpose of this paper to adduce evidence for this point of view.

Let me résumé the problem as I see it. I am not questioning the existence of a subdialect corresponding to what has been called the "South Midland" dialect. But I claim that evidence can be provided to show that it should be renamed "Outer Southern" (since it will include western Southern speech); the dialect now called "Southern" would then be renamed "Inner Southern."[3] By the same token, the so-called "North Midland" would be renamed "Lower Northern," and the currently named "Northern" would be renamed "Upper Northern." Explicit is the claim that the two Northern dialects and the two Southern dialects have more linguistically significant resemblances to each other than the resemblances that obtain between the currently styled North and South Midland dialects--my renamed Lower Northern and Outer Southern, respectively.

AL 001 374

Let us now consider the points in favor of the Midland hypothesis under the three headings used by proponents of that viewpoint--vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation--beginning with vocabulary, the most important for them.

The word "blinds," which is also Canadian, is not the common term for "shades" in the Kentucky Appalachians where I live, though this is supposed to be a South Midland speech area par excellence. "Skillet" is hardly a strictly Midland item, since I know of a person nicknamed this in Mississippi, where the word is indigenous. "Snake-feeder" for "dragonfly," to "hull" beans, and "arm-load" seem to be valid Midland items, as is "a little piece" for "a short distance," but I have heard "a quarter till five o'clock" and "wait on" at least sporadically elsewhere. "Poke" for a paper sack and "pack" for "carry" do not cover the Midland area, as the advocates of the Midland hypothesis admit, and in any case are, like so many items with which extensive dialect theories are shored up, not used by standard speakers. Or is "Midland" only a substandard dialect? I wonder how many speakers in the area in question are familiar with the diagnostic word "sook," used to call cows. Where I live we use the Midland expression, "want off," but I never heard "pine" used for "kindling," though it is supposed to be diagnostic for Midland speech. I never heard such Midland items as "bawl" for a calf's cry, "lead horse," or "sugar tree." But then I never heard such South Midland expressions as "jacket" for "waistcoat," "fire board, milk gap," or "clabber milk." One thus wonders about the value of such items. But the standard list does correctly predict that cows will "moo," not "low," where I live.

In contrast with these rather shaky and mostly rustic underpinnings of the "Midland" hypothesis, one can cite solid vocabulary links between the so-called South Midland and Southern dialects: "lightning bug, butter beans, light bread, pully bone, wait on, pole cat, roasting ears, branch, French harp," the expression "might could," and "right" used adverbially. "Right smart" is at best semistandard, and I only vaguely recall hearing "disremember" and "jack(a)leg preacher." Other items common to the two areas are not familiar to me: "clabber, middlins, ash cakes, hay shocks, pallet, roll the baby," and "salad" for "garden greens." I am familiar with "corn shucks" and "rock fence," which I think are rightly ascribed to the two regions. In my home town we have side by side "spigot" and "faucet," "bucket" and "pail,""green beans" and "string beans," "earthworm" and "redworm," "comfort" and "puff," "seesaw" and "teeter-totter," and "brook, creek, run," and "branch." Some of these are held to be North Midland or Northern, as are "baby buggy" and "stoop," which we also use. Evidently such vocabulary items have little diagnostic value. While "South Midland" does not use "carry" in the Southern sense of "take," it does agree with Southern against North Midland in the use of "bag" and "sack," "rock and "stone," the slang word "cock," and "evening" for "afternoon."[4]

One may conclude that vocabulary items favor grouping the so-called South Midland dialect with the so-called Southern dialect at least as much as, and apparently even more than, they favor the current grouping. Let us now consider the morphological and syntactic items. If "you 'uns" is really a general Midland item, then standard speakers in the area do not have that kind of speech. "You all" groups the South Midland with the South. "Where all, when all, who all," and "what all" extend farther afield. If "clumb" for "climbed" and "seen" for "saw" are diagnostic, one can find little Midland speech in educated circles. "All the further" may be the only valid item which is citable for standard Midland grammar. In short, these items are inconclusive.

Though pronunciational matters are of far greater importance than lexical items, for reasons discussed later, none of those cited for "Midland" speech (McDavid 1958:518) will stand scrutiny. Thus, postvocalic "r" is as typical of Northern speech as of any other. Anyhow, the reduction of underlying //r// in the right environments is probably a late enough rule in the grammar to cast doubts on its suitability as a major differentiator of dialects--either in New England, New York City, or the Southern States. A rounded vowel in "wash, wasp, log, hog," and the like is more likely in the so-called Southern dialect than in "Midland" speech. The schwa alleged for unaccented syllables in such words as "haunted, careless," and "congress" is not really characteristic of South Midland, at least. The mountaineers have a song called "Careless Love" in which "-less" has a strongly fronted reduced vowel. The South Midland areas that I am

familiar with have [ɪ], not [ə], in the desinences "-ed" and "-es," as well as in "pocket, surface, package, show 'im," and the like. The uncompounded word "with" sounds odd enough to "South Midland" ears when pronounced with a final thorn to disqualify it as a characteristic of the alleged Midland dialect. The intrusion of //r// in "wash, Washington, ought, water" is scarcely isolated in the Midland; an underlying //r// has to be posited for some of these words in "r-less" dialects in Great Britain and America. This leaves us with a final putative criterion, the difference between merging and keeping distinct the words "Mary, merry, marry." I shall return to these words to indicate that something quite different from what is usually supposed is involved here. For the present it will suffice to point out that the isogloss is not something that sets Midland or South Midland apart, for Northern agrees with these dialects in this matter.

Thus the pronunciational criteria alleged for the "South Midland" dialect evaporate. Others show that it should be grouped together with the so-called "Southern" dialect.[6] Foremost is the non-diphthongal phonetic treatment of underlying long //ī// before voiced segments other than //g// (for the problems involving following nasals and intervocalic //t//, vide Bailey [1968c:47-48]). In the two areas the diphthong is reduced to [a] in "ride, fine, tribe," and "hour" is often pronounced like "ire," as also in England. In the South Midland and the non-Tidewater South we also hear "cain't," initial [sr] in "shrink" and "shrimp," a reduced front vowel in "pocket, package," and the desinences already mentioned, syllabic [ɫ:] in "bulge" and "bulk," the differentiation of pairs like "hoarse" and "horse," and a fronted peak in "cow" and "loud." One hears a falling or rising diphthong in the accented syllables of "Tuesday" and "duty"; if the diphthong is rising, palatal affricates ([č ǰ]) develop. Substandard speakers in the two areas pronounce "put, took, soot" with [ə]. The merger of "poor" with "pore, pour" which is typical of Tidewater and non-Tidewater Southern and of "r-ful" mountaineer speech is also found in some Northern dialects, but not generally in the so-called "South Midland" dialect. The latter and general Southern have opener vowels in "thing, swing" and in "bait" than other dialects in America, and one hears the vowel of "bait" in "pleasure" and "treasure" in the speech of many. Both areas show a front glided [æ^{ɪ}] in "trash, bag, bang," and frequently also in words of other phonetic make-up like "camp" and "ask." In-gliding is prominent in "sieve, dim, reb, ram," and other types of words in both areas, where one also finds the same frontings and retractions of non-front lax vowels before grave and non-grave segments, respectively. Except in the westward regions of both areas, one hears a central vowel in "food," a raised central vowel in "cod," a rounded [œ] in "cup," and up-glided [ɔ^{ʊ}] in "caught." In "could" [ɤ] is quite general.

Returning now to "Mary, merry, marry," I show from spectrographic evidence and other arguments in an article to be published later this year (Bailey 1968a) that there is in America an isogloss separating two different treatments of postvocalic non-nasal sonorants which I there claim to be the chief isogloss that differentiates all American dialects. To the north of it speakers syllabify all such segments with the marked or postvocalic syllabification; even intervocalic non-nasal sonorants go with preceding vowels. To the south of the isophone speakers have the unmarked or antevocalic CV syllabification of intervocalic non-nasal sonorants, unless the diphthongization of single underlying long vowels or some similar factor causes the marked syllabification. I argue that the dialects on either side of the isogloss do not treat "Mary, merry, marry" differently because of any difference in underlying representations or because of any essential difference in the neutralization of front vowels before tautosyllabic //r//. Although a simple isogloss on a dialect map would mislead one into the wrong view, the fact is that all dialects have some kinds of such mergers or neutralizations. But because of the different syllabification of intervocalic //r// in "r-less" American and British dialects, the environment for the merger is lacking in these words.

While it is admittedly true that, except in words like "hero" and "Xerox," "r-ful" or "Outer" Southern speech agrees with the dialects to the north in the phonetic handling of postvocalic //r//, rather than with those of the Lower South, the two Southern dialects agree in the treatment of the other non-nasal sonorants following vowels. Here the rule is very pervasive. Particularly

important for dialectology is the handling of postvocalic laterals. Though all American dialects have a diphthong ending in a dark syllabic [ɫ] in "kill," only the Northern dialects have this diphthong in "killer." The clearly segmental or consonantal dark [ɫ] in Southern "killer" shows up very differently on spectrograms. Both Southerners and Northerners have a diphthong ending in a dark-colored syllabic [ɫ] in "mail," but only Southerners show a clear-timbred unsyllabic [l] in "mail it."

From all that has been said, I conclude that the "Midland" dialect is an artifact of a wrong methodology. Kurath (1949:11) describes the methodological principle of word geography in these terms: "If we have at our disposal a sufficiently large number of regionally or locally restricted words, we are able to draw dialect boundaries." He claims (1949:11) that the isoglosses between the two Midland dialects are "less numerous, more widely spaced, and often shifting," as compared with the "seams" that bound the entire Midland area. Unfortunately, I know of no check on the validity of this method that has been carried through by its proponents. Meyer (1875:294-95) was more candid in in admitting that such boundaries are quite arbitrary and more artificial than "natural." Actually, the various vertical and horizontal (regional) isoglosses form a thick mesh in many cases, where one might just as well say the age or social differences are more important than the spatial. In Marckwardt's (1957: maps 2 and 3) well-known study of the dialect areas in the North-Central States the northern limit of Midland is demarcated chiefly by these disparate lexical items: "greasy, snake-feeder, sook, sugar tree, wipple tree, pail, stone boat, Dutch cheese." These words, other than "pail" and "greasy," would not be known to many urban speakers. With such socially disparate items, it is no surprise that the alleged "boundary" is so hypothetical and "shifting." The isoglosses diverge so radically as to be useless for positing the boundary alleged. It is therefore amazing that such firm conclusions have been drawn from such data without any demonstration of the validity of the data-gathering methods or of the uses to which the data have been put.

Another drawback of word geography is that, despite the awareness of overlapping waves from different centers in creating dialects like the so-called South Midland dialect on the part of many dialectologists (Kurath 1949:36), their methods preclude an adequate study of this phenomenon. Keyser (1963), in a review of Kurath and McDavid's The Pronunciation of English in the Atlantic States, has shown the utility and importance of ordered rules in this connection. They are now being used by sociodialectologists like Labov, who has also devoted much care in working out methods for eliciting as informal data as possible (Labov et al. 1965, Labov 1966, Labov et al. 1968).

Now that my case has been presented, I am obliged to register a caveat concerning it. Neither I nor those of the opposite view have any objective demonstration of the validity of our points of view. We have not demonstrated the generalizability of our data or the validity of our weighting of the isoglosses. This absence is remarkable on the part of those who advocate the conclusions based on the older data-gathering methods, in view of Pickford's (1956:217,221,225) devastating critique of those methods and of relying so heavily on lexical features, especially predominantly rural ones. More rigidly controlled methods are now being used in some sociodialectological investigations. As for weighting isoglosses, I suspect that those dependent on rules occurring earlier in the ordering will carry more weight, if only because their outputs undergo more rules later--which results in greater changes in the final output.

If the different views on the Midland dialect under discussion simply reduced to a contest between different museum arrangements of dialect data, the discussion would have little import for the understanding of man's linguistic competence. Although I have elsewhere (Bailey 1968b) suggested empirical tests for the effects on communication of the relative apartness of rules in different absolute orderings or in unmarked reorderings in different dialects, I am bound to admit that the present study has a value which is negative rather than positive. For it simply reveals the weaknesses and counterintuitive results of certain assumptions that have at one time or another been current. Thus, the isophone that I have claimed to be the main one in America has not previously

been recognized, let alone as such, in the manuals that I have had access to. And yet it casts grave doubt on the hypotheses that have been established. The difference in the treatment of non-nasal sonorants affects large sets of lexical items and is therefore important even from the old quantitative point of view. Moreover, it leads to the setting up of major areas that accord with the intuitions of all those who speak and write of Northern and Southern speech when they are not aware of the Midland hypothesis. This difference is one dependent on phonological rules. Unlike lexical differences, it does not preclude writing a single underlying representation of English and a common set of rules for which all hearers have a linguistic competence. A grave weakness of attributing too much importance to lexical items, aside from the fact that too little is yet known about the ordering of lexical insertion rules in a grammar, is that they easily jump across major dialect boundaries. As Kurath (1949:8) observes, a farmer "may hear and learn some new words" when he goes to a regional shopping center, "but his pronunciation and grammar are little affected by these contacts." The effects of listening to radio and television have been found to be of like nature. But linguistic rules formalize generalizations about dialects. Since they affect many words, even a purely quantitative weighting would give them more weight than isolated lexical items.[7]

I shall conclude with some general comments. It is regrettable that, at a time when dialectology might offer an escape from the view that the only real grammars are those mental representations of idiolectal speaking competences present in individuals, the possibility that there are real mental representations underlying polydialectal hearer competences is being explored in so few quarters.[8] Unless we are to assume that a child formulates different grammars for the large set of age, class, and regional dialects that he becomes competent to understand during the ten to fifteen years during which he is aquiring his native language--dialects current in his living environments and on the communication media--then we must suppose that he is constantly revising his underlying representation of the language during this time so that it will accommodate all the varieties of it that he understands. We would like to know whether the result in different individuals begins to level out at some point, in a grammar that is fairly common to most speakers of the language. If so, it would no doubt more or less agree with a pseudo-proto-stage of the language which a linguist would reconstruct internally from the dialects in the absence of earlier documentation.[9] This fact would explain why the vowels of Middle English or Old Church Slavonic look so much like those that appear in the underlying representations of generative-phonological treatments of English and Russian, respectively. Any light that a new dialectology might shed on these issues would help overcome what seems to me to be the sterility of the diachronic-synchronic dichotomy envisioned by many linguists. A way would then be open for integrating the at present sometimes isolated branches of linguistic studies--synchronic studies with dialectology and historical linguistics, and these with sociolinguistics and the rest.

NOTES

[1]More attention seems to have been paid to settlement routes than to real linguistic phenomena.

[2]This intuitive falsity of the Midland hypothesis seems never to have been explained away by the proponents of that classificatory scheme.

[3]In passing, I shall note that I see no more reason for including the dialects of eastern Virginia and the eastern Carolinas in the Southern macrodialect than for including New England speech in the Northern group.

[4]The two Southern areas also avoid confusing "trash" with "garbage." Cf. "rubbish" in Great Britain. Whether "counterpane" (rhymes with "pin") is a typically "South Midland" and "Southern" item or not is a question I lack the requisite information to settle.

[5]This difference is, of course, lexical--not phonological. I am merely following the listing by McDavid cited in the text.

[6]Other phonological items that got left out of the text are exemplified by the merger of "pen" with "pin" and "winter" with "winner" in the two areas. Another is the usual deletion of //l// in "William, tell you," and the like.

[7]Since it is an open question whether a lexical item is weightier than a rule, one can legitimately choose either guess. But logic supports weighting a rule affecting many words more heavily. Till the question is demonstrably settled, one may wish just to add up all the words affected by a rule and compare them numerically with the individual lexical items. Though this would have the effect of weighting the rule more heavily, it is, paradoxically, the conclusion that must follow for dialectologists like McDavid (personal communication) who reject the use of rules in dialectology. Note further that until the weighting question is settled, little can be gained by adding more and more data; for there will never be enough words citable by word geographers to equal the number of words affected by the average phonological or syntactic rule. Here I must express my regrets at having so few syntactic criteria--even if only selectional features--in favor of the dialect grouping which I am advocating. Hardly any work has been carried on in this area of dialectology, though Labov and his colleagues have done some admirable ground-breaking.

[8]Note that the notion of generation is at least a shade closer to production than competence, which, as currently being interpreted in many quarters, simply implies a checking procedure on the correctness or the acceptability of a sentence. In this latter situation, the sentence is already given, not "generated" in one obvious, if non-technical, sense of that term.

[9]Just as diachronic reconstructions of a proto-language made from sufficiently diverse representatives begin to change less and less after a certain point, regardless of the quantity of detailed additional materials used, so it is likely that the revisions of individual polydialectal synchronic grammars reach a point where different ones begin to look alike, regardless of the original order in which the ingredients have been added.

ADDENDUM

[7a]The isoglosses for the dialects of different classes should not be expected to co-incide. This obvious fact is ignored in trying to use words from different social levels to draw a given boundary line.

REFERENCES CITED

BAILEY, Charles-James N. 1968a. "Dialectal Differences in the Syllabification of Non-Nasal Sonorants in American English." To appear in General Linguistics.

_____. 1968b. "Optimality, Positivism, and Pan-Dialectal Grammars." ERIC/PEGS.

_____. 1968c. "Segmental Length in Southern States English: An Instrumental Phonetic Investigation of a Standard Dialect in South Carolina." ERIC/PEGS.

KEYSER, J. 1963. Review of Kurath and McDavid (1961). Language 39:303-16.

KURATH, Hans. 1949. A Word Geography of the Eastern United States. Studies in American English 1. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

_____, and McDAVID, Raven I, jr. 1961. The Pronunciation of English in the Atlantic States: Based upon the Collections of the Linguistic Atlas of the Eastern United States. Studies in American English 3. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

LABOV, William. 1966. The Social Stratification of English in New York City. Washington: Center for Applied Linguistics.

_____, COHEN, Paul, and ROBINS, Clarence. 1965. A Preliminary Study of the Structure of English Used by Negro and Puerto Rican Speakers in New York City: Cooperative Research Project No. 3091. New York: Columbia University.

_____, and LEWIS, John. A Study of the Non-Standard English of Negro and Puerto Rican Speakers in New York City: Cooperative Research Project No. 3288. Volume I: Phonological and Grammatical Analysis. New York: Columbia University.

MALMSTROM, Jean, and ASHLEY, Annabel. 1963. Dialects, U.S.A. Champaign: National Council of Teachers of English.

MARCKWARDT, Albert H. 1957. Principal and Subsidiary Dialect Areas in the North-Central States. Publication No. 27 of the American Dialect Society. University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press.

MEYER, Paul. 1875. Review of G. I. Ascoli, Archivio glottologico italiano. Romania 4:293-

McDAVID, Raven I., jr. 1958. "The Dialects of American English." In Francis, W. Nelson, The Structure of American English. New York: The Ronald Press Co., pages 480-543.

PICKFORD, Glenna Ruth. 1956. "American Linguistic Geography: A Sociological Appraisal." Word 12:211-33.